

On "Fears and Scruples" by Robert Browning

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Oh "Fears and Scruples" by Robert Browning

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Abstract

"Fears and Scruples" is a poem in "Pacchiarotto and Other Poems" by Browning 1876. In spite of the fact that it is very noteworthy as a religious poem, somehow people in general don't pay much attention to the poem. The poem consists of only twelve stanzas with forty-eight lines. It might not be recognized as one of Browning's religious poems as deep as is "A Death in the Desert" nor as grand as "Saul". From the standpoint of the depth and valuableness of its teachings, however, it is not as insignificant as to be excluded from his other religious poems. Nay, it would be rather higher in rank of than they. "The analogy of the poem compares this silence of the Divine Being with that of a man's friend, who wrote him many valued letters, but otherwise kept aloof from him. It is suggested by experts that the letters are forgeries. The man loves on. It is then suggested that his friend is acting as a spy upon him, sees him readily enough and knows all he does, and some day will show himself to punish him. But this is to make the friend a monster! Hush!—What if this friend happen to be—God?"¹⁾ Here I would like to think of its mentality of the faith with each stanza.

I.

Here's my case. Of old I used to love
him

This same unseen friend, before I knew:
Dream there was none like him, none above
him,—

Wake to hope and trust my dream was true.

Some one soliloquizes—I have a friend. I used to love him even though I saw him not nor knew. My knowledge concerning him was that in a dream. However, he is the highest man and nobody is above him. He is without parallel in history. Awakened from the dream, I hoped and believed that my knowledge in the dream would be true.

Although I knew him in the dream, it sounds to me as truth, something in my spirit.

Who is the unseen friend? It is the object of the faith in the mind of the religious believer. If Jesus Christ is mentioned, it is brief and to the point. I didn't meet him as yet, I have not seen him either. But I loved him, and now still love him; I believed him and now still believe him. Why? Because he is the saviour of mankind and his holiness and love had been shown. Some men would maybe belittle it as a mere dream. But, for me, it struck my heart as truth. I had to think of the dream as true. He said: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."²⁾ One of his disciples said: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."³⁾ If it be so, my way of believing does not necessarily follow a superstition, nay, it may be in the original nature of faith. Through the dream, the heavenly spirit might have descended to shine in my whole spirit. Paul said: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy spirit."⁴⁾

II.

Loved I not his letters full of beauty?

Not his actions famous far and wide?

Absent, he would know I vowed him duty;

Present, he would find me at his side.

He is my unseen friend, but it is not that I know nothing about him. My knowledge of him is not limited within that in the dream. Letters from him are wonderful, how full of beauty they are! His teachings are left in the four gospels by his four disciples, I relish them, and enjoy and love them. His actions are also written in the same gospels well known in the world, which urged me follow him. His words and actions are holy and unique and made me imagine one thing in him that is unearthly. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.⁵⁾ Even though he is absent, he knows that I firmly believe him and vowed myself to him. If he comes to me, he will find that I will throw away everything to be at his side. My heart is longing to do so.

III.

Pleasant fancy! for I had but letters,
 Only knew of actions by hearsay:
 He himself was busied with my betters;
 What of that? My turn must come some day.

Of his words and actions, I have not directly seen nor heard. I only know them through the Gospels which are written by others. They are all hearsay. Critics may say that my faith is fancy. Yes, fancy; it is, however, pleasant fancy. In this pleasant fancy he is the owner of my soul. I am his servant.⁶⁾ In him all my struggles and worries will be melted away. I am not afraid of critics. He is so busy with my betters that he can't come to me now. It is all right, I have no right to complain of it. Soon my turn will come and he will surely come to me. Thus, I am comforted.

IV.

"Some day" proving—no day! Here's the
 Puzzle.
 Passed and passed my turn is. Why complain?
 He's so busied! If I could but muzzle
 People's foolish mouths that give me
 pain!

Jesus Christ must come to me someday which I expect. But years passed and he has not come to me yet, and so I am perplexed. Has the some day changed into no day? I began to mutter to myself, but I check it, because he is so busy. The only thing that pains me is the abusing mouth of critics. They laugh at my trust and devotion toward him in scorn as he has not come. I would somehow or other muzzle their mouths.

V.

"Letters?" (hear them!)" You a judge of
 writing?

Ask the experts!—How they shake the
 head
 O'er these characters, your friend's inditing—
 Call them forgery from A to Z!

His teachings are recorded in the Gospels. They are God's living words for the believers. "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works."⁷⁾ They are; however, critics on the Bible, and their abuse is sharp, they fancy themselves to be critical students, analysing the four Gospels and conclude that the greater portion is not believable...then despising believers of his letters. They will say, "the believers must ask the experts on their authority, and they would say, the letters are forgery from beginning to end." In this manner, they would threaten the faith of believers of less knowledge.

VI.

"Actions? Where's your certain proof"
 (they bother)
 "He, of all you find so great and good,
 He, he only, claims this, that, the other
 Action—claimed by men, a multitude?"

For the believers of Jesus, his actions are of course valuable. His actions were so god-like that I believed him. "I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves."⁸⁾ "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."⁹⁾

Critics, however, bothering me, say, "you have no certain proof concerning his actions. The actions might be mere learning by hearsay. There are so many great and good men in the world, among them might be such a great and good man in the world, among them might be such a great and good man as he, that you can not draw a conclusion. You think of him only, and forget all others. Is it not rash and thoughtless?"

VII.

I can simply wish I might refute you,
Wish my friend would, —by a word, a
wink, —
Bid me stop that foolish mouth, —you brute
you!
He keeps absent, —why I cannot think.

Critics annoy and trouble me. I may not be able to refute their views myself. However, when he in whom I believe bids me to stop their foolish mouths, I will be able to break all their arguments, as I will be given the strength from him. They say he will not come, but I believe He will appear before long. He will surely come with his great authority some day, and he will bring new life to those who obey, and destruction to those who go against him.

VIII.

Never mind! Though foolishness may flout
me,
One thing's sure enough: 'tis neither
frost,
No, nor fire, shall freeze or burn from
out me
Thanks for truth—though falsehood, gained
—though lost.

A feeling of gratitude towards truth is burning in my bosom. No one can destroy my thanks for the eternal truth shown by Jesus. Even though the critics flout me, this sense of thanks can't be broken. Even though snow and frost are frozen, they can't freeze my thanks. Even though raging flames get angry, they can't burn my thanks. My feeling of thanks is always shining brightly regardless of whether falsehood gains or loses. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.¹⁰⁾

IX.

All my days, I'll go the softlier, sadlier,
 For that dream's sake! How forget the
 thrill
 Through and through me as I thought "The
 gladlier
 Lives my friend because I love him still!"

I believe him because of my dream. No matter whether the dreamer is blessed or not. From now on, with this dream, I will live softer and sadder. Enemies revile me as he has not appeared. What a deep silence and sorrow it is! He is still for me an unseen friend. Believing him, however, I shall spend the rest of my life calmly and sadly. Even though I'm lonely and sad, that I believe and love him surely makes him glad. When I think of this, I am affected by an unforgettable thrill in my whole body. So I will still trust him and not change my loyalty to him. "Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy."¹¹⁾

X.

Ah, but there's a menace someone utters!
 "What and if your friend at home play
 tricks?
 Peep at hide-and-seek behind the shutters?
 Mean your eyes should pierce through
 solid bricks?"

An intimidator says to me, "Does your friend play tricks at the home of the solid bricks? Is the reason he does not make his appearance that he is hiding in that solid house and secretly scouting your actions behind the shutters in order to condemn you to a penalty? While you believe in him as God, is he not your enemy who would catch you in a trap? Showing not himself, however, he requests you to know him. Does he mean your eyes should pierce through the solid bricks? If so, what would you do? Is it indeed not making a fool of man?"

XI.

"What and if he, frowning, wake you, dreamy?
Lay on you the blame that bricks—conceal?
Say 'At least I saw who did not see me,
Does see now, and presently shall feel'?"

The intimidator continued, "Suppose your unseen friend should appear, whom you longed to see. Frowning, he would wake you from dreaming and censure your faults and weak points which he found when he peeped through. I saw and knew you even though you did not see me, but you now must see and feel me. If so, how astonished, disillusioned, bitterly disappointed and afflicted you would be. While you trusted and loved him as God for many years, he might be a devil. Nevertheless do you continue to believe him as the Lord of Love? How about forgetting him from now on?"

XII.

"Why, that makes your friend a monster!"
say you:
"Had his house no window? At first nod,
Would you not have hailed him?" Hush, I
pray you!
What if this friend happen to be—God?

At last the intimidator says, "He whom you believe must be a monster. Saying you can't see him, 'had his house no window?' It is unreasonable that he requests you to see him while he does not show himself. When he nods, can't you hail him? He let you give him everything and does not appear even up to this day. Is he one who lets you fall into a hell after taking all things from you. The intimidator's abuses are not used up. He does not clearly respond while you call him 'Lord Jesus Christ'. You call him 'the living God's son', King of Kings, Lord of Lords however, in fact he may not exist, if he exists, it seems merely a monster. Then I will say these simple words:

Hush, I pray you!

What if this friend happen to be—God?

The answer is enough with this line. They say that he must be a monster, but I say what if he happens to be God. If he is God, and I believe he is God, he will save those who believe and obey him and totally destroy those who ridicule him. They will be cast into outer darkness, there men will weep and gnash their teeth.¹²⁾

For many are called, but few are chosen.”¹³⁾ He is the eternal Lord, living God and true Saviour. This last line expresses the most important significance of the poem.

Conclusion

Faith is believing. It is not believing by seeing, but it is believing without seeing. That is why there are hardships, uncertainties and risks. For believing what cannot be seen is faith. Faith is a far greater motive power of the heart than knowledge. Believing by seeing is not faith but is knowledge. That is why it can be done easily by anyone. Taking the risk of hardship and adventure to do the thing that cannot be accepted by every one is believing. That is why there is moving, and jumping of progression of spirit. However, to the people who do not know the hearts of those believers, there are no other so pitiful and so hateful as those people who are believing and sacrificing all they possess to one who is not seen. Surrounded by these sardonic smiles of persecution, the faithful lives need special courage to hold to his faith firmly. Looking up at heaven while standing firmly on the earth, there are the special features of a faithful life. Thinking of God, longing for Christ to open his spiritual advancement, is like a scientist opening the world unknown by one principle on the assumption or an adventurer who goes on to an unknown land depending on a compass needle. It is a noble, courageous, and adventurous, and interesting plan of work. So however foolishly one may insult me, for what am I to be afraid!

Browning knew well the heart of the believer as well as the taunts of the unbeliever.

In explanation of this poem, Mr. Kingsland received from the poet

the following letter:— "I think that the point I wanted to illustrate in the poem you mention was this: Where there is a genuine love of the 'letters' and 'actions' of the invisible 'friend,' however these may be disadvantaged by an inability to meet the objections to their authenticity or historical value urged by 'experts' who assume the privilege of learning over ignorance, it would indeed be a wrong to the wisdom and goodness of the 'friend' if he were supposed capable of overlooking the actual 'love' and only considering the 'ignorance' which, failing to in any degree affect 'love,' is really the highest evidence that 'love' exists. So I *meant*, whether the result be clear or no."¹⁴

Notes :

- 1) Edward Berdoe, "The Browning Cyclopaedia", (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1924), P. 163.
- 2) John 20:29.
- 3) Hebrews 11:1.
- 4) I Corinthians 12:3.
- 5) Romans 1:20.
- 6) cf. Romans 1:1.
- 7) John 14:10.
- 8) Ibid., 14:11.
- 9) Ibid., 3:16.
- 10) Hebrew 11:3.
- 11) I peter 1:8.
- 12) Matthew 22:13.
- 13) Ibid., 22:14.
- 14) Edward Berdoe, "The Browning Cyclopaedia", (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1924), pp. 163-164.

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